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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000153

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, IO/UNP, R, PA/OA

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SUBJECT: FATHERLAND FRONT HOLDS PEACEFUL DEMONSTRATION AGAINST
IRAQ WAR

1. Summary. On February 19 the Fatherland Front of Vietnam (FFV)--the umbrella organization for Communist Party mass organizations in Vietnam--coordinated a peaceful and orderly demonstration inside the Friendship Association House across the street from ConGen to show opposition to a war with Iraq. The meeting lasted exactly two hours, was attended by mostly middle-aged party members, and was orderly and quiet. The event, which was reported in the press, was a carefully controlled expression designed to show public support for the current position of the Communist Party of Vietnam. End summary.

2. Approximately 500 Vietnamese were assembled in GVN official vehicles and brought to the Friendship Association House on Le Duan street, across from ConGen, at 7:00 am. Both uniformed and plain clothes police were present. The rally began with a series of brief speeches and concluded with the last speaker leading the audience in repeating the phrases: "Oppose the war in Iraq," "Support a stable peace in the Middle East," and "Solidarity and friendship between the Vietnamese and Iraqi people." The room contained several banners with the same messages, as well as "The U.S.-British coalition should not cause war against the Iraqi people."

3. The rally was organized under the FFV by the Youth Association, but participants came from across the spectrum of mass organizations in Ho Chi Minh City, including labor and religious organizations. The Youth Association reportedly held its own rally in HCMC the evening of February 18, where they collected over 1000 signatures on a banner they plan to send to the U.S. Ambassador in Hanoi. The February 19 event was filmed by the national television station and reported in the press. There were also press reports about the February 18 Youth Association rally.

4. Poloff and RSO spoke with some of the protesters after the meeting had adjourned promptly at 9:00 am. All said that they had been invited by the FFV on February 18. The presidents of two of the mosques in Ho Chi Minh City added that they had no ill feelings towards American citizens, the USG, or the ConGen, but that they had sympathy with the Iraqi people as victims of a war led by the USG, and that they believed the USG and the U.K. should use their power to create peace, not war. The Buddhist monk speaking at the rally also said that the USG should not act on its own but work with the Security Council to ensure that Iraq satisfies the conditions in UNSC Resolution 1441. (Note: None of them raised economic concerns, although under the oil for food program Iraq was the biggest importer of Vietnamese rice in 2002, buying 871,800 metric tons, or about 27 percent of Vietnam's total rice exports. End Note.)

5. Comment. The Fatherland Front periodically orchestrates meetings of this kind to publicly reflect the views of the Communist Party. It is therefore interesting to note that the whole event was done on a small scale and in a quiet and orderly fashion. There was also a relatively large representation from Ho Chi Minh City's normally apolitical Muslim community: there are only 5,000 Muslims in Ho Chi Minh City's population of roughly 7 million, the 25 Muslims in attendance represented 5 percent of the crowd at the rally. End Comment.
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